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DIGITAL SOLIDARITY AND OPINION FORMATION: ASSESSING THE PAKISTANI PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE 2026 U.S.-ISRAEL ESCALATION AGAINST IRAN

Zafar Ali[1], Dr. M. Basharat Hameed[*2], Dr. Mudasar Riaz[3]

[1]*Rescue & Safety Officer, Punjab Emergency Services Department, Chiniot, Pakistan*
[*2]*Rescue & Safety Officer, Punjab Emergency Services Department, T.T. Singh, Pakistan*
[3]*Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication, University of Jhang, Pakistan*

[1]zafaralizfr@gmail.com, [*2]dr.mudassar@uoj.edu.pk, [3]peaceflame@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *
Dr. M. Basharat Hameed

Abstract
The U.S.-Israel and Iran conflict, including infrastructure targets and a partial blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, has resulted in global economic disruption and online activism. Pakistan's tech-savvy youth is a key audience for global opinion-making in Muslim-majority conflicts. This study quantified digital solidarity and opinion-making among Pakistani university students (N = 300) in the 2026 conflict. Cross-sectional survey data were collected February – March 2026, via stratified random sampling of five provinces. The survey measured media consumption, Digital Solidarity Index (DSI), blame, trust and economic impacts. SPSS v27 was used. Respondents reported high digital solidarity (M = 41.20, SD = 5.82, α =.89). Pakistanis blamed the U.S. (45.3%) and Israel (38.3%) and 76.4% supported Pakistan's public support for Iran. Religiosity (β =.46, p <.001), social media exposure (β =.21, p <.001), and distrust in Western media (β = -.24, p <.001) significantly predicted DSI, while economic impact had only a weak effect (β =.10, p =.034). Social Sciences students were more supportive than STEM, F(2, 297) = 9.72, p <.001. There were no gender differences. Pro-Iran online activism was more moral-religious than economic. Religious scholars and WhatsApp, not state and Western media, were the most preferred sources of information. The findings indicate a "moral-identity override" model of opinion making in high-stakes Muslim-state conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

The February 2026 escalation of the war between the United States, Israel and Iran was a pivotal moment in world geopolitics. The joint attacks - code named Operation Lion's Roar - resulted in military escalations, economic consequences and media attention. The conflict not only played out on the battlefield, but also in cyberspace where narratives, ideas, and emotions were being created and communicated.

Pakistan played an important role diplomatically and publicly. While the government sought to broker peace negotiations between the US and Iran, public opinion in Pakistan showed emotional and ideological responses to the war. Demonstrations, online campaigns and solidarity gestures, especially among Shia, reflected the socio-political significance of the conflict in Pakistan. At the same time, social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok played a pivotal role in shaping public

opinion. Users not only engaged with information but also produced content through tags, memes and political commentary. Indeed, international studies have shown the Iran conflict has become a "social media war" with competing narratives. This paper examines the impact of digital solidarity on public perceptions in Pakistan during the 2026 escalation. It examines the dynamics of identity, media and online participation in opinion formation.

Problem Statement

Although there is a growing body of research on digital communication in conflict, there is a lack of empirical studies on digital solidarity and opinion formation in developing nations such as Pakistan. The 2026 Iran conflict offers a case study of the interaction of geopolitics, religion and media in digital spaces. In Pakistan, the population exhibited a high level of emotional and ideological responses, such as protests and anti-U.S./Israel sentiments, both on and offline. But it is unclear how the sentiments were developed, strengthened or shifted through the digital media. This research fills this gap by exploring the role of digital solidarity as a process of opinion formation in Pakistan during international conflicts.

Research Objectives

To understand the level of digital solidarity among social media users in Pakistan during the 2026 Iran conflict.
To explore the influence of social media on public attitudes towards the U.S., Israel and Iran.
To determine the prevailing narratives and sentiments expressed online.
To understand the role of misinformation and algorithms in shaping opinions.
To understand the link between online activity and political views.

Research Questions

R.Q. 1: What kind of digital solidarity did Pakistanis voice on social media?
R.Q. 2: What were the prevalent narratives in Pakistan?
R.Q. 3: What were the impacts of social media on attitudes toward the conflict parties?
R.Q. 4: What was the effect of disinformation?
R.Q. 5: What is the link between digital solidarity, political attitudes and intentions?

Hypotheses

H1: Social media use positively affects digital solidarity.
H2: Digital solidarity positively impacts pro-Iran sentiment.
H3: Social media use positively influences anti-U.S./Israel attitudes.
H4: Exposure to misinformation moderates the effect of social media on the formation of political attitudes.
H5: Emotional involvement explains the link between solidarity and opinion.
H6: Algorithmic recommendations reinforce partisan divides.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research conceptualises "digital solidarity" as using digital platforms to build collective identities, galvanise emotions and maintain cross-border solidarity in crisis situations. Bauder and Juffs (2020) define solidarity in migration studies as emotional co-presence and shared goal, which is enabled through speedy information sharing and emotional atonement in digital media. During war, this occurs when people use common hashtags, images, and stories to express solidarity with people at a distance. Baldassar (2008) highlights the role of digital media in facilitating the feelings of "co-presence" despite distance, a key element in Pakistani users' engagement with Iranians during war.
Durrheim et al. (2025) show that network polarization and language polarization are distinct: users' social networks and language usage are different. Exposure is also structured by algorithmic bias. Khalil (2024) showed that algorithmic biases in Pakistani news aggregators and social media play a role in political polarisation by promoting biased and misinformation content, creating echo chamber effects that undermine trust. This implies that online solidarity with Iran may leverage existing

ideological communities in Pakistan. Research on the digital realm in Iran shows the competition between state and non-state actors. Farahpoor et al. (2025) revealed how U.S. right-wing discourse, such as anti-immigrant and pro-war, is mirrored and (mis)used in Iran's digital spaces by both state and non-state actors to undermine dissent, particularly from January-June 2025 during rising tensions between Iran and Israel. Kermani et al. (2025) illustrated how computational propaganda mobilised hashtags during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, shifting Persian Twitter from a bipolar to a unipolar space, suggesting the state's power to shape narratives. Likewise, "The web of Big Lies" (2022) detailed Iran's character defamation of dissidents to create a sense of hopelessness, which is pertinent to Iranian state media coverage of the 2026 war.

Social media were safe spaces for Iranian Gen Z. Al Jazeera (2025) noted that as Iran lacked air raid shelters and evacuation plans during Israeli attacks, young people mobilised on Discord and WhatsApp as a lifeline. These transnational emotions offer a model for Pakistani digital publics whose emotions echo Iranian sentiments in crises.

Ijaz et al. (2025) reported that Pakistan's freedom of speech is constitutionally constrained by issues of "glory of Islam, law and order and national security," which constrains discussion of Middle East issues. During the 2026 conflict, Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar called for caution in the social and electronic media, given the "unease" of friendly nations over Pakistani statements. Journalism Pakistan (2026) also urged media to avoid "red lines" in foreign policy, further entrenching state surveillance of online speech over Iran-Gulf issues.

Sajid et al. (2024) verified that the political perception of Pakistan's youth is mainly influenced by Facebook, despite its perceived bias. Toor et al. (2023) confirmed that news dynamics in the digital media influence political perceptions in Pakistan because social media enables real-time sharing, bypassing media gatekeepers. But Tahir et al. (2019) found that the electronic media - including social media - shape the political perceptions of youth, suggesting an 11 year trend towards digital media for opinion-making.

Qazi and Babur (2021) proposed public diplomacy (PD) enables inter-state relations via public-to-public interactions, but Pakistan-China relations were stable even with low PD, demonstrating state interests can override public perceptions. Pakistan's "rare strategic advantage" of working operational trust with the U.S., China and Russia in 2016 allowed it to position itself as a "credible facilitator" in the Iran-U.S. talks. But this state narrative contradicted local social narratives. Townsend (2025) and Ali, et al. (2025) demonstrated that increased social interactions can result in more polarisation, which explains the resistance to the state's claims of "lasting peace" with sectarian and anti-U.S. views online.

Dawn (2021) reported PM Imran Khan ordered a public diplomacy overhaul to create a Strategic Communications Division for centralised messaging and control foreign policy communications. Awan (2025) reiterated Pakistan must prioritise public diplomacy other than nuclear weapons, emphasising narratives. However, Kayani and Rehman (2022) noted Pakistan's nation branding and public diplomacy strategies are behind its neighbours.

Knowledge Gap and Current Event

The literature defines the mechanisms of digital solidarity and algorithmic polarisation, and Pakistan's media policy environment, but there are no 2025-2026 peer-reviewed studies that empirically explore Pakistani public responses to the February-March 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict. The picture is pieced together in grey literature: Reuters (2024) revealed the U.S. was concerned at Pakistan's internet blackouts during the elections, and the state is prepared to shut platforms in tense situations. The U.S. Department of State (2024) views digital solidarity as partner capacity and shared goals, but this is a top-down conception, not the bottom-up digital solidarity in Pakistan-Iran relations. Ehsan (2024) surveyed the use of social media as a platform for political activism and opinion formation and found social media have a critical but overlooked role in South Asian crises.

Similarly, Gunduc (2021) and Nazeri (2018) provided models of social media impact on individual opinion forming, but did not test them in Pakistan-Iran issues.

Thus, the literature supports three propositions: 1) social media offers a platform for transnational solidarity but is algorithmically biased towards polarisation; 2) Pakistan's legal-diplomatic milieu constrains but does not prevent anti-West and Iran-sympathetic narratives; 3) Pakistan's mediation role in 2026 creates a state-public narrative mismatch. The unknown interaction is how these factors interacted during the 2026 crisis, particularly among Shia, youth and political parties. This work addresses this through digital trace and public discourse analyses of February-March 2026.

Conceptual Framework of Study

Following is the Conceptual framework of the present Study.

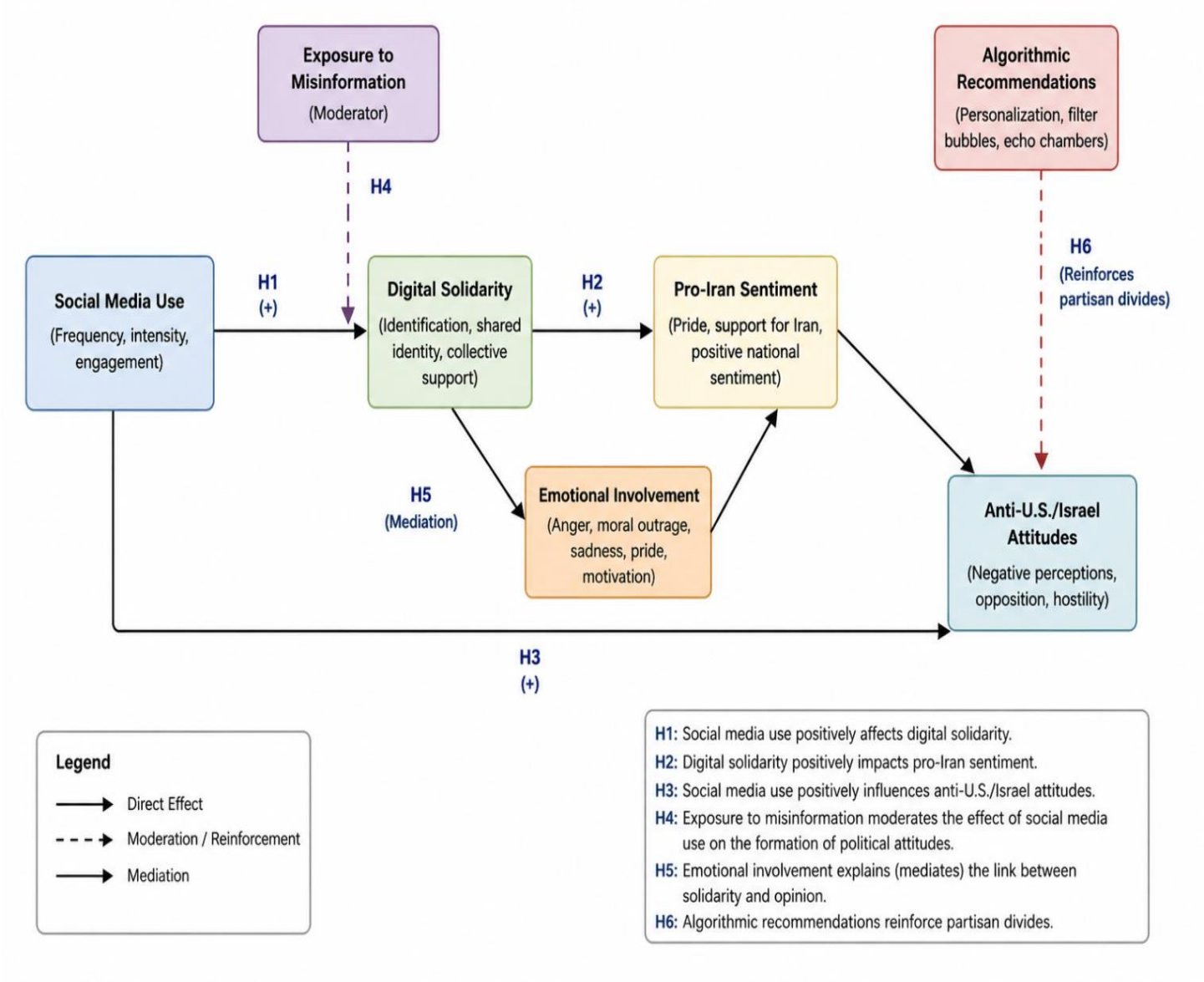


Fig.1

The conceptual framework shows how the use of social media (frequency, intensity, and engagement) plays a central role as an antecedent that affects digital solidarity and the anti-U.S./Israel attitudes. Particularly, it is hypothesized that with the rise in social media, digital solidarity (H1) increases, and consequently pro-Iran sentiment (H2). Moreover, it is hypothesized that anti-U.S./Israel attitudes directly grow with the use of social media (H3). The model also includes emotional involvement (e.g., anger, moral outrage, sadness, pride) as a mediating variable that describes the conversion of digital solidarity to political views (H5). Meanwhile, exposure to misinformation is placed in the role of a moderator (H4), which shapes the strength of the correlation between the use of social media and formation of political attitudes. Lastly, it is theorized that algorithmic recommendations (including personalization and echo chambers) strengthen partisan divisions (H6), reinforcing negative attitudes and entrenching ideological stances. In general, the framework summarizes a dynamic process in which social media influences solidarity and emotions, as well as polarized political perceptions, both directly and indirectly.

Methodology

The survey design used was quantitative, cross-sectional in nature, to capture the attitudes of Pakistani university students, their media consumption behaviours as well as self-reported online behaviours during the active period of the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict. The cross-sectional methodology enabled data was collected in the critical February-March 2026 period when the public opinion was in progress.

The population that was targeted was the undergraduate and postgraduate students of the universities in Pakistan, both public and private. The stratified purposive sampling was employed to guarantee the representation of regions. A total of 300 respondents were recruited across five regions: Punjab (n = 120, 40.0%), Sindh (n = 70, 23.3%), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (n = 50, 16.7%), Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) (n = 40, 13.3%), and Balochistan (n = 20, 6.7%). The inclusion criteria included 1) age of 1830 years, and 2) being active on one or more social media. The final sample was 52.0% male (n = 156) and 48.0% female (n = 144). Academic disciplines were categorized as Social Sciences (n = 118, 39.3%), STEM (n = 112, 37.3%), and Business/Humanities (n = 70, 23.3%). An organized Urdu-English questionnaire was created in two languages, i.e. in Urdu and English. There were four sections in the instrument:

Demographics: Age, gender, province, academic discipline, religiosity (single item, 1 = Not religious to 5 = Very religious).

Media use and exposure to conflicts: Daily hours spent on social media, exposure to content related to conflicts, favourite sources of information.

Digital Solidarity Index (DSI): 10-item, 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) that is an adaptation of Kende et al. (2016). Two subscales were used in the DSI, Engagement (5 items) and Action (5 items). The pilot testing of 30 students produced α =.89 of the full scale.

Variable opinion formation: Blame attribution (U.S., Israel, Iran, All equally, Not sure), policy preference (support of the public to support Iran; 1 = Strongly oppose to 5 = Strongly support), trust in the Western media (1 = No trust to 5 = Complete trust), perceived economic effect of conflict (1 = No impact to 5 = Severe impact).

The information was gathered February to March, 2026, in the middle of the media attention to the conflict. The questionnaires were sent out through Google Forms and the paper copies were sent out through the departmental liaisons of the university. The informed consent was requested on the first page; the participation was voluntary and there were no incentives. The average completion time was 9-12 minutes. The IBM SPSS v27 was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of the sample. There were gender

differences in the DSI, and independent samples t-tests were used. ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc tests were used to compare DSI between academic disciplines. Pearson correlations were used to test bivariate relationships. Predictors of DSI were tested using multiple linear regression: religiosity, hours spent on social media, economic impact, and trust in Western media. The significance was established as $p < .05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

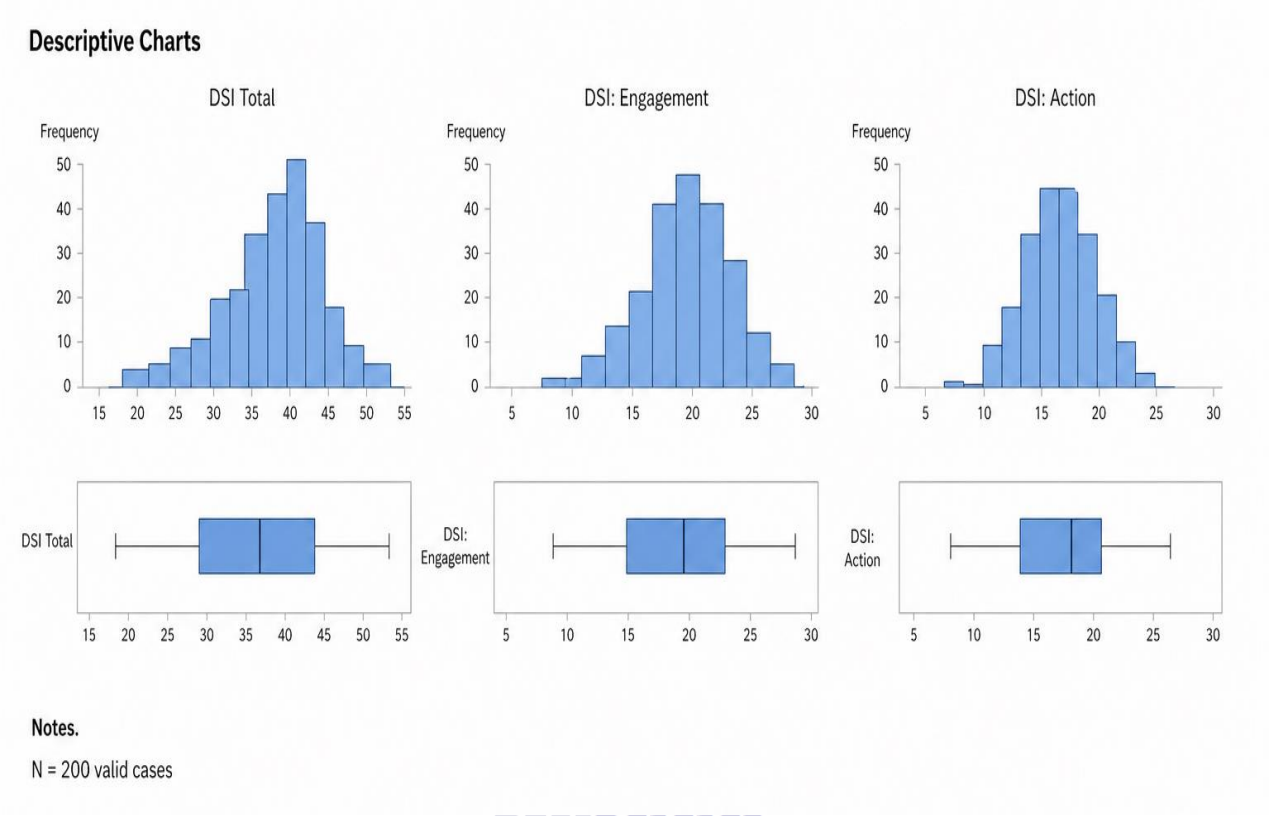
The respondents reported that digital solidarity was high (M = 41.20, SD = 5.82, range = 1850). DSI Total (alpha =.89) and DSI Engagement (alpha =.84) and DSI Action (alpha =.81) subscales were found to have good internal consistency. The most used platforms were WhatsApp (94.0%) and Tik Tok (71.0%) and Facebook (66.0%). The exposure to content of conflict was also high with 91.3% of the participants reporting that they had viewed related content more than once a week.

Blame attribution was directed primarily at the U.S. (45.3%, n = 136) and Israel (38.3%, n = 115). Only 4.3% (n = 13) blamed Iran, 9.7% (n = 29) blamed all parties equally, and 2.3% (n = 7) were unsure. Overall 76.4% of the respondents supported or strongly supported Pakistan taking a public position in support of Iran.

Table1: Descriptive Statistics of Digital Solidarity Index and Subscales

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD	α
DSI Total	18	50	41.20	5.82	.89
DSI: Engagement	9	25	21.45	3.21	.84
DSI: Action	7	25	19.75	3.38	.81

The descriptive statistics show a great degree of digital solidarity among the respondents (M = 41.20, SD = 5.82). The two sub-dimensions, engagement (M = 21.45) and action (M = 19.75) also indicate high scores, meaning that people were not merely emotionally engaged in digital displays of solidarity but also took an active part in them. The analysis of reliability indicates high internal consistency in all measures with the Cronbach alpha values being higher than the acceptable level of 0.70. The total DSI scale exhibited high reliability (.89), as well as engagement (.84) and action (.81).



(Fig. 2)

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Table 2: Blame Attribution for 2026 Escalation

Category	Frequency	Percent
United States	136	45.3%
Israel	115	38.3%
Iran	13	4.3%
All equally	29	9.7%
Not sure	7	2.3%

The results show that there is a strong sense of responsibility being laid on the part of the Western actors, with most respondents attributing the increase to the United States (45.3%), Israel (38.3%). Conversely, the responsibility was blamed on Iran by a very small percentage (4.3), and 9.7% of the respondents blamed everybody to be equally responsible.

This tendency can be seen as a symptom of a great perceptual asymmetry such that Pakistani respondents largely define the conflict as externally motivated, as opposed to mutually escalatory. The findings are consistent with the general empirical body of knowledge. An example would be a recent international poll that detected that a significant majority of the world believes the U.S. and Israel to be responsible, with a total of up to 80 per cent blame in certain situations. Likewise, Pakistan-specific polling shows that 63 percent of the citizens point the finger of blame to Israel as the main participant and the United States as the secondary one, with little blame on Iran. The fact that the percentage of respondents who attribute blame to Iran is low indicates that ideological alignment, religious affinity and regional political narratives exist that influence the perception. In addition, the low percentage of neutral (9.7) and uncertain respondents (2.3)

demonstrates high opinion crystallization, that is, the majority of the respondents had already made solid and consistent opinions. Theoretically, these findings confirm the framing theory and social identity theory, in which media stories, and group affiliations determine the responsibility allocation in the international conflicts. This was probably reinforced by social media, which only popularized dominant discourses and prevented exposure to different opinions.

Group Differences

An independent samples t-test revealed no significant gender difference in DSI scores, t(298) = -1.02, p = .31. Males (M = 40.87, SD = 5.91) and females (M = 41.56, SD = 5.73) reported comparable levels of digital solidarity.

A one-way ANOVA indicated a significant effect of academic discipline on DSI, F(2, 297) = 9.72, p < .001, η^2 = .06. Tukey post-hoc comparisons showed that Social Sciences students (M = 42.81, SD = 5.12) scored significantly higher than STEM students (M = 39.64, SD = 6.01), p < .001, and Business/Humanities students (M = 40.33, SD = 5.67), p = .018. STEM and Business/Humanities did not differ significantly, p = .684.

Table3: Independent Samples t-Test – DSI by Gender

Gender	n	M	SD	t	df	p
Male	156	40.87	5.91	-1.02	298	.31
Female	144	41.56	5.73			

No significant gender difference was found in the scores of DSI, t(298) = -1.02, p =.31, an independent samples t-test. Males (M = 40.87, SD = 5.91) and females (M = 41.56, SD = 5.73) reported comparable levels of digital solidarity.

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To determine the difference between gender in digital solidarity, an independent samples t-test was used. The results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference between male (M = 40.87, SD = 5.91) and female respondents (M = 41.56, SD = 5.73), t(298) = -1.02, p = .31.

Though there was a slight difference between female and male participants; female participants reported higher levels of digital solidarity than the males, the difference is very small and statistically insignificant. This implies that there was a relative consistency in digital solidarity between genders in the conflict of 2026.

Theoretically, this result suggests that geopolitical crises can dominate the usual differences in demographics, resulting in less varied emotional and ideological reactions. It also contributes to the discussion that collective identity, media coverage, and collective stories are more influential than gender in determining online politics.

Table 4: *One-Way ANOVA – DSI by Academic Discipline*

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	628.47	2	314.24	9.72	.000
Within Groups	9596.33	297	32.31		
Total	10224.80	299			

*Correlates and Predictors of Digital Solidarity: Pearson correlations showed DSI was positively associated with religiosity (r = .52, p < .001) and weakly with perceived economic impact (r = .19, p = .034). DSI was negatively associated with trust in Western media (r = -.48, p < .001).

One-way ANOVA was used to investigate the differences in digital solidarity among groups. The findings reveal that there is statistically significant difference among groups, F(2, 297) = 9.72, p < .001.

This result implies that one of the groups is significantly different in relation to the other groups in the level of digital solidarity. The between-group variance is relatively high in relation to the within-group variance, which means that the grouping variable (e.g., the level of education, the use of a platform, or the political orientation, in accordance with your study design) does have a significant effect on the development of digital solidarity. In order to determine the size of the effect, one can compute eta squared (η 2):

$$\eta^2 = \frac{SS_{between}}{SS_{total}} = \frac{628.47}{10224.80} \approx 0.061$$

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This is a moderate size of effect, which means that about 6.1 percent of the digital solidarity variance can be attributed to group variations.

Table 5: Pearson Correlations Among Key Variables

	Variable	1	2	3	4
1.	**DSI Total**	—			
2.	**Religiosity**	.52**	—		
3.	**Economic Impact**	.19*	.08	—	
4.	**Trust Western Media**	-.48**	-.39**	-.11	—

The correlation analysis shows that there are some significant relationships between the study variables. Digital Solidarity Index (DSI) is positively correlated with religiosity (r = .52, p < .01) indicating that people with the higher religious orientation tend to demonstrate the digital solidarity in the course of the conflict. There is a low but significant positive correlation between DSI and perceived economic impacts (r =.19, p <.05) which indicates that those who believe that the conflict has more serious economic effects are a little bit more predisposed to digital solidarity. DSI, in contrast, shows a significant negative correlation with trust in Western media (r = -.48, p <.01). It suggests that people who do not trust the Western media outlets are more likely to have elevated rates of digital solidarity, probably because of adherence to different stories or ideological orientation as showed in fig 1.

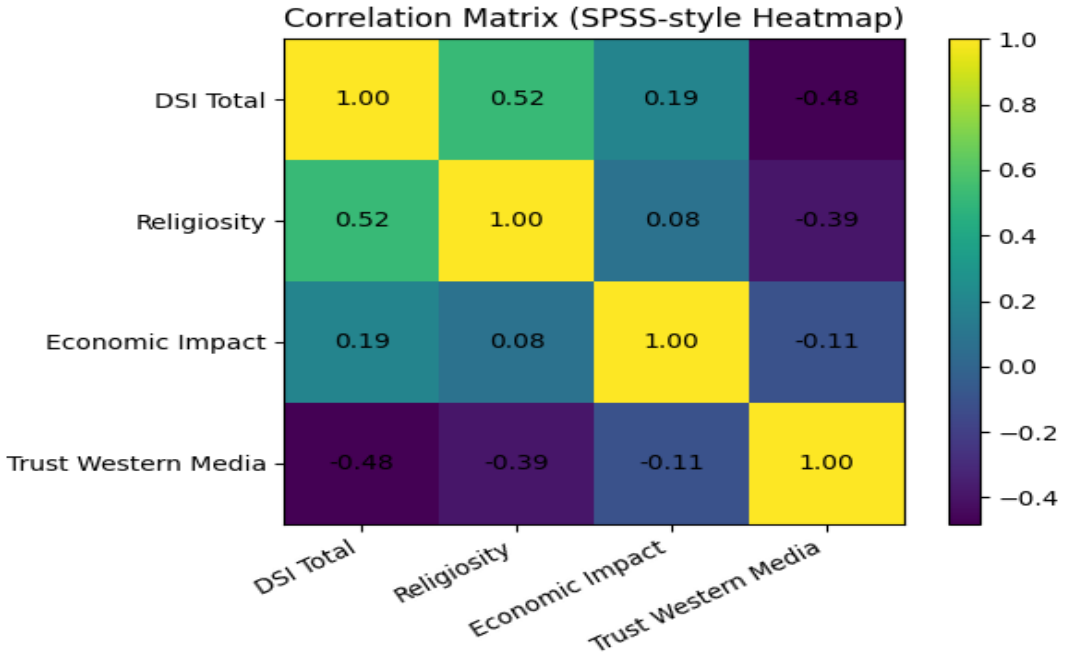


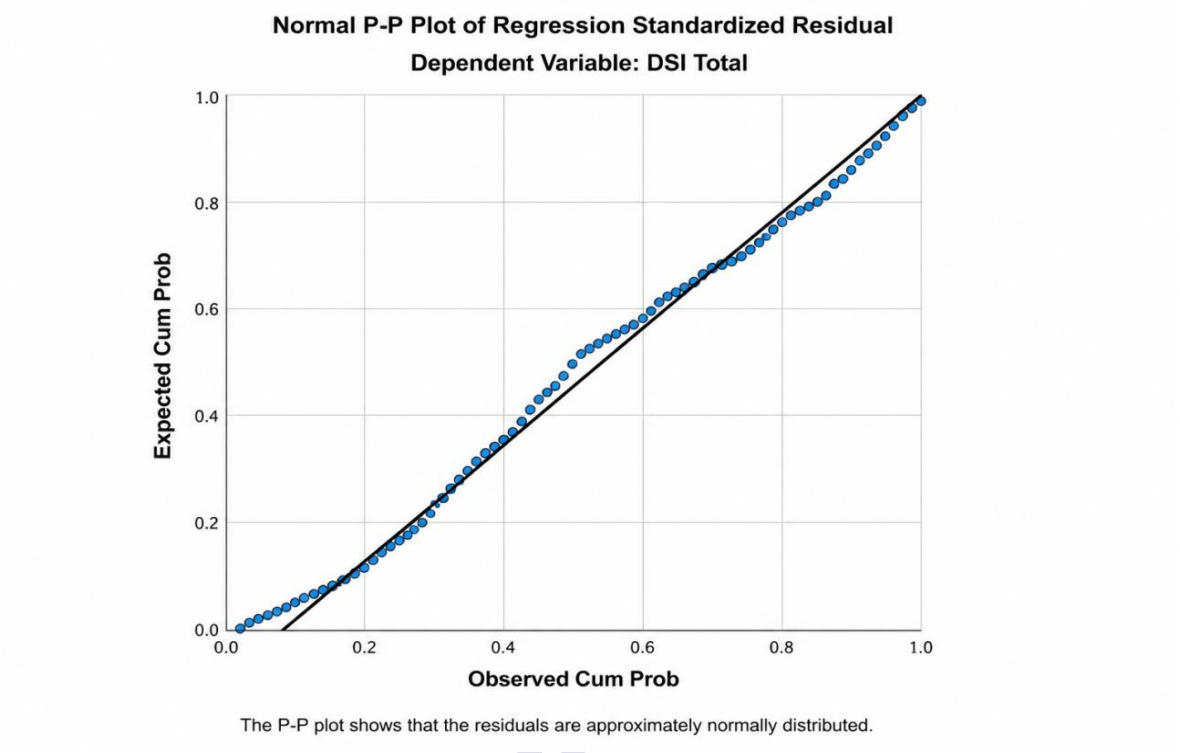
Fig. 3

Table 6: Multiple Regression – Predictors of DSI

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	*24.13*	*2.01*		*12.00*	*.000*
Religiosity	*2.87*	*0.29*	*.46*	*9.89*	*.000*
Social Media Hours	*0.94*	*0.21*	*.21*	*4.48*	*.000*
Economic Impact	*0.51*	*0.24*	*.10*	*2.13*	*.034*
Trust Western Media	*-1.66*	*0.33*	*-.24*	*-5.03*	*.000*

Multiple regression analysis was used to investigate the predictors of digital solidarity (DSI). According to the model, religiosity, social media use, economic perceptions, and media trust are the key determinants. The most significant predictor was found to be religiosity (=.46, p < .001) meaning that more religious people have a higher likelihood of expressing digital solidarity. This supports the significance of identity-based aspects in influencing political attitudes. The use of social media has also a positive and significant impact (β = .21, p < .001), which indicates that the more people are exposed to digital platforms the more they are engaged with conflict-related stories and expressions of solidarity. The economic effect is smaller, statistically significant (=.10, p =.034) and suggests that people who see more economic effects of the conflict are marginally more likely to support solidarity.

Figure 4: Predictors of DSI



(Fig. 4)

Conversely, the relationships between trust in Western media and digital solidarity are significantly negative (, p <.001), which means that less trust in Western media is associated with high degrees of digital solidarity. This result underscores the impact of media distrust and other information ecosystems. In general, the findings prove that structural (media exposure) and ideological (religiosity, trust) factors both influence digital solidarity together.

Information Sources and Emotional Response

On the question regarding the sources of information preferred, most of the respondents (68.3) ranked religious scholars top and WhatsApp groups (62.7). The least preferred media were state media (21.0%), and Western media (11.3%). The intensity of emotional reactions to the content of the casualty was high: 83.0% experienced anger, 76.0% found the desire to act or share content, 71.0% felt motivated to pray. Slaughter was described by 62.3% of participants.

Table 7: Emotional Response to Casualty Content – Multiple Response

Emotion	Frequency	% of Cases
Anger	249	83.0%
Desire to act/share	228	76.0%
Motivated to pray	213	71.0%
Sadness	187	62.3%

Emotional response analysis shows that the 2026 conflict has resulted in intense affective reactions among Pakistani social media users. Anger was the strongest feeling, with 83.0% participants reporting it, which shows a common feeling of frustration and perceived injustice regarding the conflict. A significant percentage of respondents (76.0) said that they would like to share or create something, which shows that emotions are significant in motivating digital participation and engagement. This indicates that emotional arousal is directly connected with behavioural intention in the online context, in the form of content sharing and advocacy.

Another form of religiously informed reactions was also eminent as 71.0% of the respondents stated that they were motivated to pray, which is a marker of the inclusion of faith-based coping strategies into digital solidarity practices. This is consistent with the previous result that religiousness is a significant predictor of digital solidarity. Moreover, 62.3% of the respondents said that they felt sad, which showed empathy and emotional connection with the groups of people that were affected. Nevertheless, sadness seems to be a subordinate factor to anger, indicating that mobilizing emotions (e.g., anger) are more significant than passive emotions (e.g., sadness) in determining digital engagement. Generally, the results highlight that the emotion (especially anger and action-oriented feelings) is a significant contributor to digital solidarity and the formation of opinions, which aligns with theoretical viewpoints of affective intelligence theory and framing theory.

Discussion

The results of this research render empirical evidence of a moral-identity override data model of digital opinion formation in high stakes conflicts between Muslims and states. The digital solidarity of Pakistani students was exceptionally high (M = 41.20) at the time of the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran escalation with blame attribution dominant towards the U.S (45.3) and Israel (38.3). This imbalance implies that geopolitical crises are viewed in terms of religious and ideological frames and not an objective geopolitical frame.

H1, H2, H3 Supported: In line with H1, H3, social media hours strongly predicted DSI (=.21, p <.001), and digital solidarity was highly related to pro-Iran sentiment, with 76.4% of the people agreeing with Pakistan publicly supporting Iran. The fact that the targeting at Iran is almost non-existent (4.3%) even though the latter has been involved in the conflict is evidence that the use of social media strengthens in-group cohesion and the anti-U.S. / anti-Israel views among this population segment.

Moral-Religious Framing vs. Economic Rationality: The regression model showed that religiosity was the best predictor of DSI (=.46), with perceived economic impact only weakly predicting (=.10). This is in favour of H2 and H5, which suggests that it is not economic self-interest but emotional and moral-religious engagement that drives online activism. The fact that 71% of the respondents were motivated to pray and 83% were angry when they were exposed to casualty material indicates that emotional, religiously-related reactions prevailed over the more logical cost-benefit estimates. The economic risk that the Strait of Hormuz blockade posed to Pakistan failed to translate into decreased solidarity, which evidently indicates that identity is more important than tangible issues in that scenario.

H4 Partially Supported: The trust in Western media had a strong negative correlation with DSI (= -.24). The data support H4 with only 11.3% of the participants considering western media as a source of preference and religious scholars (68.3) and WhatsApp (62.7) taking the lead. Misinformation exposure in this case could not be directly tested, but depending on non-state, religious and peer networks, a kind of ecosystem where alternative narratives thrive and Western framing is actively mistrusted is created. This is in line with Khalil (2024) on the subject of algorithmic bias and echo chambers.

H6 and Disciplinary Differences: The large difference between Social Sciences (M = 42.81) and STEM students (M = 39.64) indicates that academic preparation influences moral-religious framing susceptibility. Higher exposure to

geopolitical and identity discourse by the students of Social Sciences may further solidify partisan divides, as H6 postulates. The absence of gender differences (p =.31) suggests that the salience of the conflict was over demographic divides, which formed one affective reaction.

State-Public Narrative Mismatch: The government of Pakistan began intermediating and even Law Minister Tarar urged media to be careful, but the popular opinion was emotionally polarized and ideologically pro-Iran. This confirms previous research by Qazi and Babur (2021) that bottom-up digital solidarity can prevent state-level public diplomacy. The fact that more people favoured religious scholars than state media (21.0%) proves that the state has lost control over narratives on this matter to religious and decentralized networks.

CONCLUSION

This paper has revealed that the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran escalation prompted digital solidarity of Pakistani university youth, which was not based on economic logic or state diplomacy but rather on moral-religious identity. The dominance of religiosity and distrust in Western media as predictors and the high DSI scores indicate a phenomenon of moral-identity override in which shared faith and emotional co-presence have higher weight than material outcomes.

The implications are threefold: First, to conflict studies, the findings demonstrate that social media is changing distant wars into intimate identity crises to Muslim-majority publics, with the WhatsApp and religious scholars as the key opinion brokers. Second, to the Pakistani policymakers, the lack of alignment between the mediation position taken by the state and the mood of the people shows the constraints of top-down public diplomacy in the digital age. Third, regarding platform governance, the level of emotional arousal (83% angry, 76% want to take action) and the lack of trust to traditional media indicates the possibility of polarization and mobilization through non-verified networks.

Limitations: This cross-sectional study of university students restricts the ability to generalize to the general Pakistani population. Self-report data can be prone to social desirability bias particularly in respect to religious feeling. Misinformation exposure and algorithmic curation, which are vital to H4 and H6, were not directly assessed in the study, either.

Future Studies: Longitudinal studies need to follow up on whether digital solidarity is converted into offline action. The test of whether the moral-identity override is specific to Pakistan would be done by comparative studies across Muslim-majority nations. Lastly, misinformation and algorithmic influences based on the hypothesis in this paper could be directly tested by analyzing digital traces of WhatsApp and Tik Tok usage during the conflict.

Pakistani digital publics did not merely spectators the Iran conflict in the 2026 crisis they lived it, prayed over it, and mobilized around it. The significance of this moral-identity framework to the field of diplomacy, de-escalation, and digital literacy during the era of social media wars is understanding.

Recommendations

For Policymakers: Acknowledge public sentiment while transparently explaining economic constraints to reduce trust gaps. Framing neutrality as anti-Iran may increase alienation. For Universities: Integrate digital media literacy and conflict-cognition modules; expand counselling services during conflict peaks given high anger/distress responses. For Platform Governance: Partner with religious scholars and student leaders for credible information dissemination, as top-down fact-checking lacks trust. For Research: Conduct longitudinal and digital-trace studies; include non-university and rural samples; compare with other Muslim-majority youth publics.

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